

Green Spirituality and the Transformation of Self in *The Color Purple*

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Abstract— “Every leaf, every blade of grass, every sand, every inch of earth is alive. This is what Shug talks about, God being in everything” (Walker 202).

Green spirituality, often called eco-spirituality, emphasizes the profound connection between human life and the natural world, viewing nature as sacred rather than merely functional. This paper examines how eco-spiritual awareness develops in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, focusing on the protagonist Celie's spiritual journey. As Celie transitions from silence and oppression to self-awareness, her growing sensitivity to nature becomes central to her transformation. Drawing on eco-critical and ecofeminist perspectives, along with insights from Félix Guattari and Bron Taylor, this paper argues that Walker presents spirituality as experienced and felt within the natural world rather than as something imposed from outside. Through symbols such as the color purple, trees, rivers, and the garden, the novel illustrates how reconnecting with nature can lead to healing, empowerment, and a more ethical way of living. Ultimately, this study suggests that Walker's vision of spirituality provides a meaningful response to contemporary ecological concerns.

Keywords— Green spirituality, eco-criticism, eco-spirituality, environment, anthropocentrism, self-awakening



I. INTRODUCTION

The Vedic idea “Mātā bhūmih putro’ham prthivyāh”—“The Earth is my mother, and I am her son” (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.12), expresses a way of thinking about the world in which human life is deeply connected to the Earth. This sense of connection is not new. Long before modern environmental debates, many cultures understood nature as something sacred rather than something to be controlled. Rivers, trees, wind, and sunlight were not seen as mere physical elements but as meaningful and even spiritual presences. Living close to nature, people developed ways of life that reflected respect, balance, and a sense of belonging within the natural world.

In contrast, the modern world has gradually moved away from this perspective. With industrialization and the rise of anthropocentric thinking, nature has often been reduced to a resource—something to be used, managed, or exploited.

This shift has not only contributed to environmental damage but has also created a kind of spiritual distance from the natural world. In this context, eco-spirituality is an important way to rethink how humans relate to nature. It encourages a return to ideas of interconnectedness, care, and responsibility, suggesting that environmental concern is not only a scientific or political issue but also a deeply ethical and spiritual one.

What is particularly significant is that eco-spiritual thinking is not limited to any one tradition. Across religions, we find similar ideas expressed in different ways. Christianity often views nature as part of divine creation, while Hindu philosophy tends to see the divine as present in all forms of existence. Buddhism emphasizes interdependence, reminding us that all forms of life are connected, and Islam, through the idea of *tawhid*, affirms the unity of all creation (*Qur’ān* 112.1–4). Despite their differences, these traditions share a common understanding that the natural world is not

separate from human life but part of a larger, meaningful whole.

It is within this broader framework that Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* can be read in a new light. While the novel is often discussed in terms of gender, race, and oppression, it also offers a powerful reflection on spirituality and nature. Walker presents spirituality not as something distant or controlled by institutions, but as something that can be experienced in everyday life—especially through one's relationship with the natural world.

This becomes clear in the journey of Celie, the novel's central character. At the beginning, Celie's understanding of God reflects the world around her: God appears distant, male, and authoritative, reinforcing her silence and suffering. However, as her relationship with Shug Avery develops, Celie begins to rethink this idea. She starts to see God not as something outside her, but as something present in everything—trees, fields, water, and even herself. This shift is quiet but powerful, and it changes the way she understands both spirituality and her own identity.

Celie's growing attention to nature—her ability to notice beauty, to care for her garden, and to find peace in the natural world—marks an important turning point in her life. Her spiritual awakening is closely tied to this renewed connection with the environment. Critics such as Trudier Harris have pointed out that this transformation challenges traditional religious ideas that have often silenced Black women, allowing Celie instead to develop a more personal and empowering sense of spirituality (Harris 157–58).

This transformation can also be understood through broader eco-spiritual frameworks. Bron Taylor argues that nature-centered spirituality recognizes the value of the natural world in itself, rather than only in terms of human use (Taylor 12). Similarly, Félix Guattari suggests that human well-being depends on the interconnection of environmental, social, and psychological dimensions of life (Guattari 28). These ideas help us see that Celie's journey is not only personal but also ecological and social. In addition, ecofeminist thinker Rosemary Radford Ruether highlights the link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature (Ruether 45). This connection is clearly reflected in Walker's portrayal of Celie's life.

This paper argues that *The Color Purple* presents eco-spirituality as a lived experience that emerges through attention, care, and connection with the natural world. Through Celie's journey, Walker demonstrates that reconnecting with nature can be a source of healing, strength, and self-discovery. At the same time, the novel encourages readers to rethink their relationship with the environment, suggesting that true spiritual awareness may be found in recognizing the world around us as sacred.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Critical analyses of *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker have historically focused on themes of gender, race, and identity, particularly in relation to the experiences of Black women within a deeply patriarchal society. Earlier scholarship often highlights Celie's journey from silence to self-expression, interpreting her transformation primarily as a quest for psychological and social empowerment. In contrast, more recent studies propose that this evolution is not only social but also profoundly spiritual, thereby allowing for eco-spiritual interpretations of the text.

Among the most significant contributions is Trudier Harris's examination of the novel's reworking of religious belief. Harris argues that Walker challenges dominant, patriarchal representations of God by presenting an alternative vision that is more inclusive and life-affirming (Harris 157–58). According to Harris, Celie's shift from viewing God as a distant, authoritative figure to experiencing the divine as something internal and relational marks a crucial step in her empowerment. While Harris's analysis primarily focuses on gender and religious critique, it also indirectly points toward an eco-spiritual understanding in which the divine becomes accessible through lived experience rather than institutional structures.

Ecofeminist theorists emphasize the link between spirituality, gender, and nature. Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural world stem from the same hierarchical systems that prioritize domination and control (Ruether 44–45). From this viewpoint, Walker's narrative can be interpreted as an ecofeminist text in which Celie's deepening connection with nature mirrors her resistance to patriarchal oppression. Her involvement with the natural world—especially through her garden—symbolizes not only personal healing but also a rejection of societal structures that devalue both women and the environment.

Greta Gaard expands ecofeminist thought into a more intersectional framework, arguing that environmental issues are deeply intertwined with matters of race, gender, and sexuality (Gaard 117–19). Her insights are particularly relevant for analyzing *The Color Purple*, as Alice Walker places her characters within overlapping systems of marginalization. In the novel, the connection between Black women and the land is not idealized; instead, it is shaped by histories of labor, exploitation, and survival. In this context, eco-spiritual awareness emerges as a form of resilience grounded in lived experience rather than abstract theory.

From a philosophical perspective, Félix Guattari's concept of ecosophy offers a holistic way of understanding the novel's structure. Guattari argues that environmental, social, and mental ecologies are interconnected and must be

addressed together rather than in isolation (Guattari 28–29). This framework aligns closely with Celie’s journey, in which her personal healing, evolving relationships, and deepening connection with nature develop simultaneously. Walker’s narrative thus reflects an integrated vision of transformation in which ecological awareness is inseparable from social and psychological change.

Similarly, Bron Taylor’s idea of dark green religion offers an important lens for interpreting the novel’s spiritual dimensions. Taylor describes a form of spirituality that recognizes the intrinsic value of nature and challenges human-centered belief systems (Taylor 12–13). This perspective is evident in the novel through Shug Avery’s teachings, which encourage Celie to perceive God in all aspects of the natural world. Such a view moves away from institutional religion and toward a more immediate, experiential understanding of the sacred.

Despite these important contributions, existing scholarship often treats spirituality, ecology, and social critique as separate areas of inquiry. There remains a need for a more integrated approach that brings these dimensions together—one that can account for how *The Color Purple* constructs a unified eco-spiritual framework in which nature functions simultaneously as a site of healing, resistance, and self-discovery. This paper addresses that gap by bringing together ecofeminist theory, eco-spiritual philosophy, and close textual analysis to show that Walker’s work offers not only a critique of oppression but also a meaningful vision of ecological and spiritual renewal.

III. ECO-SPIRITUAL AWAKENING IN ‘THE COLOR PURPLE’

At the heart of eco-spirituality lies the idea that reconnecting with nature can lead to healing. In *The Color Purple*, this idea is expressed through the characters’ lived experiences, particularly Celie’s. Her journey is not only about overcoming personal suffering but also about learning to see and understand the world differently. As her awareness of nature deepens, so does her awareness of herself. Walker suggests that this renewed connection with the natural world can transform both inner life and outward experience.

3.1 The Field of Purple Flowers

One of the most significant articulations of eco-spiritual awareness appears in Shug Avery’s statement: “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and do not notice it” (Walker 196). This moment captures the essence of Walker’s vision, where

attentiveness to beauty becomes a form of spiritual recognition.

For Celie, the field of purple flowers represents more than a visual experience. It marks a turning point in her perception. Despite the hardships she endures, she can notice and respond to beauty. This shift is important because it signals a movement from passive endurance to active awareness. The color purple comes to symbolize not only beauty but also a deeper sense of presence and meaning.

Walker presents spirituality here as something embedded in everyday life rather than confined to religious institutions. Celie’s ability to recognize the beauty of the flowers reflects her emerging understanding that the sacred exists within the natural world. In this sense, eco-spiritual awakening begins with the simple act of noticing.

3.2 Trees as Symbols of Strength and Presence

Trees function throughout the novel as quiet but powerful sources of comfort and stability. Celie often turns to them in moments of distress, finding in their presence a sense of peace absent from her human relationships. When she reflects, “The trees are not trees, I do not know what it is. The air hits me, and I start to feel my skin” (Walker 211), it becomes clear that her perception of nature is changing.

This moment suggests that Celie is beginning to experience nature more intuitively and spiritually. Trees are no longer merely physical objects; they become living presences that offer support and continuity. Their rootedness and endurance mirror Celie’s own resilience as she navigates the difficulties of her life.

Nettie’s descriptions of the natural world in Africa further expand this perspective, presenting nature as vibrant and life-affirming. These descriptions not only contrast with Celie’s earlier experiences but also reinforce a broader sense of interconnectedness. In this way, trees come to symbolize both personal strength and a deeper connection to the world.

3.3 Celie’s Garden: A Space of Healing and Growth

Celie’s garden represents one of the most meaningful expressions of eco-spirituality in the novel. As she begins to cultivate it, gardening becomes closely linked to her sense of identity and independence. She observes, “Everywhere I look, I see something growing... Then I look down, and it is all like magic” (Walker 207).

The garden functions as both a physical and symbolic space. By tending to it, Celie experiences a sense of purpose and control that has been largely absent from her life. Gardening becomes a form of quiet resistance, allowing her to create and nurture life in contrast to the suffering she has endured.

At the same time, the garden reflects her inner transformation. As the plants grow, so does her confidence and self-awareness. Influenced by Shug Avery's understanding of spirituality, Celie begins to see the garden as a space where the divine is present in the processes of growth and renewal. The act of caring for the earth becomes inseparable from the act of caring for herself.

3.4 Rivers and the Flow of Spiritual Renewal

Rivers in *The Color Purple* symbolize movement, continuity, and transformation. Unlike the stillness of trees or the contained space of the garden, rivers are constantly in motion, reflecting the evolving nature of life itself.

Celie's reflection on water—how it “flows everywhere... like it belongs, like it is home” (Walker 204)—reveals her growing understanding of life as fluid and interconnected. The river becomes a metaphor for resilience, suggesting that obstacles do not stop movement but shape it.

The river also functions as a space of reflection and renewal. It allows Celie to think beyond her immediate circumstances and to see herself as part of a larger, ongoing process. Through this, Walker reinforces the idea that eco-spiritual awareness involves recognizing one's place within a broader web of life.

IV. DISCUSSION: ECO-SPIRITUALITY AS TRANSFORMATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

In *The Color Purple*, eco-spirituality is presented not as a decorative theme or symbolic layer, but as a fundamental shift in consciousness. The novel depicts a journey from alienation to connection, in which the protagonist's relationship with the natural world gradually transforms her understanding of herself, spirituality, and existence. This transformation is subtle yet profound, emerging through lived experiences rather than doctrinal teachings. Eco-spirituality in the text thus serves as an embodied practice—something felt, perceived, and internalized rather than formally articulated.

At the outset, the world Celie inhabits is marked by fragmentation. Her sense of self is shaped by violence, silence, and imposed inferiority, while her understanding of spirituality is mediated through a distant and authoritarian image of God. This separation—between self and self-worth, between human and nature, between the individual and the divine—forms the basis of her initial condition. The movement toward eco-spiritual awareness, therefore, must be understood as a process of reintegration. It is through her gradual attentiveness to the natural world that these divisions begin to dissolve.

What is particularly significant is that this transformation does not occur through dramatic revelation but through

everyday encounters with nature. The act of noticing—whether it is the color of flowers, the presence of trees, or the movement of water—becomes the starting point of change. These seemingly simple moments carry epistemological weight. They alter not only what Celie sees but how she sees. The world shifts from being a space of endurance to one of meaning, where even small details become sites of reflection. In this sense, perception itself becomes transformative, suggesting that eco-spiritual awakening begins with a reorientation of attention.

This shift in perception also leads to a redefinition of spirituality. Initially, spirituality is external, hierarchical, and inaccessible—something imposed from outside and associated with fear and submission. However, as Celie's relationship with nature deepens, spirituality becomes immanent and relational. The divine is no longer located in distant authority but experienced within the textures of the natural world. This transition is crucial because it relocates power. Instead of seeking validation from an external source, Celie begins to recognize value within herself and her surroundings. Spirituality, therefore, becomes a mode of empowerment rather than control.

At the same time, the novel links ecological awareness with the reconstruction of agency. Celie's engagement with the natural world is not passive; it involves acts of care, attention, and participation. Through activities such as gardening, she enters into a reciprocal relationship with nature—one that contrasts sharply with the exploitative relationships that defined her earlier life. This reciprocity is significant because it introduces an alternative model of interaction based on nurture rather than domination. The cultivation of the garden becomes a space where agency is practiced, not asserted through power but through care. In this way, eco-spirituality offers a reimagining of power itself, shifting it from control to connection.

Furthermore, natural elements within the novel function as models of existence that challenge rigid human structures. Trees, for instance, embody endurance and rootedness, while rivers represent movement and adaptability. These elements are not merely symbolic; they offer alternative ways of understanding life. Celie's identification with these natural forms allows her to move beyond fixed definitions of identity. Instead of being confined by her past or by social expectations, she begins to see herself as capable of growth, change, and continuity. Identity, in this context, becomes fluid and evolving, shaped by ongoing interaction with the world.

Another crucial dimension of eco-spirituality in the novel is its emphasis on interconnectedness. As Celie's awareness expands, she begins to perceive relationships between different forms of existence—between human beings and

nature, between suffering and renewal, between individual experience and collective life. This interconnectedness challenges the isolation that characterizes her earlier existence. It replaces fragmentation with a sense of belonging, suggesting that meaning is not found in separation but in connection. The self is no longer an isolated entity but part of a larger ecological and spiritual network.

This awareness also introduces an ethical dimension that is implicit rather than imposed. The novel does not present ecological responsibility as a set of rules but as a natural outcome of perception. Once the world is seen as alive, meaningful, and interconnected, care becomes a necessary response. To ignore or neglect nature is no longer a neutral act; it becomes a failure of awareness. In this sense, eco-spirituality generates an ethics grounded in attentiveness. Responsibility arises not from obligation but from recognition—from the understanding that one's existence is intertwined with the existence of others.

Ultimately, *The Color Purple* presents eco-spirituality as a means of integration that unites the fragmented aspects of human experience. It connects the inner and outer worlds, bridging the personal and the ecological, as well as the spiritual and the material. Through Celie's journey, the novel suggests that healing is achieved not by escaping from reality but by engaging more deeply with the world around us. By learning to see things differently, she learns to live differently. Thus, eco-spirituality emerges not only as a theme within the narrative but also as a way to understand existence itself—one that emphasizes connection, care, and continuous renewal.

V. CONCLUSION

The Color Purple offers a deeply meaningful understanding of eco-spirituality by showing how a person's inner healing can grow alongside a renewed relationship with the natural world. Celie's journey is not only about overcoming suffering but about learning to see differently—to notice, to feel, and to connect. Through this gradual process, she moves from a life shaped by silence and separation toward one grounded in awareness and belonging.

One of the novel's most important contributions lies in its redefinition of spirituality. Instead of presenting it as something distant or controlled by authority, the narrative brings it closer to everyday experience. The divine is no longer something to be feared or obeyed from afar; it is something that can be felt in simple moments—in the beauty of a field, in the quiet presence of trees, or in the act of caring for a garden. This shift makes spirituality more personal, more inclusive, and more deeply connected to life itself.

At the same time, the novel shows that nature plays an active role in this transformation. It is not just a background setting but a space where healing becomes possible. Through her engagement with the natural world, Celie finds a sense of stability and purpose that she has long been denied. Caring for the earth helps her rebuild her sense of self, suggesting that healing does not occur in isolation but through connection.

The idea of interconnectedness runs throughout the novel. As Celie begins to understand her place within the larger world, she no longer sees herself as alone or powerless. Instead, she becomes part of a wider network of life where everything is linked—human beings, nature, and the spiritual dimension of existence. This awareness brings a quiet but powerful sense of responsibility, in which care and attention become essential ways of living.

In this way, *The Color Purple* presents eco-spirituality as a way of life rather than just an idea. It suggests that real transformation begins with small changes in perception—with learning to notice and value the world around us. In today's context, where environmental concerns are becoming increasingly urgent, this message feels especially relevant. Walker's novel reminds us that restoring our relationship with nature is not only necessary for the planet but also for our own sense of meaning and wholeness.

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